

# Cross modular tracking, academic counselling and retention of students on traditional delivery, technology supported learning, flexible access and other awards.

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## Background and rationale

The increasing emphasis in recruitment of 'non traditional' student cohorts (Year 0, part-time evening only, Flexible Access, additional needs etc) combined with multi-staffed modules and technology supported learning (TSL) delivery is mitigating against the traditional tutor overview of cross-modular student performance and may be hiding student problems until a point of no return when formal summative evidence of failure is validated.

In addition the trend towards minimising formal assessment loading can be seen as reducing the numbers of performance benchmarks available to establish learner profiles.

The project aims to implement a continuous cross-modular tracking and assessment structure, initially for first year Environmental Science (ES) students, in order to provide such 'early warning' of student difficulties as will permit viable counselling and remedial support.

It is anticipated that such a strategy will reduce the incidence of 'under performance', 'drop outs' and 'resits' by making support available at the point problems arise and not when formal failure is established.

Experience of 'traditional' cohorts of learners in Environmental and Analytical Sciences (EAS) suggests that detailed tracking of student attendance and subsequent performance within a module can provide the basic information required to identify students 'at risk'. However the rise in TSL supported, TSL delivered or other flexible access modules makes such monitoring increasingly difficult on an individual module basis.

In addition, the move towards common first year modules across Awards means that some students may be registered on modules in which they have little intrinsic interest or which they perceive as marginally relevant. There is some (anecdotal) evidence of strategic attendance where students are concentrating their attendance and effort on modules which they see as interesting / relevant whilst devoting the minimum, or in some cases less than the minimum, effort required to successfully complete others in order to achieve progression.

We therefore need to identify and differentiate between several groups of students:

- Students who are consistent in attendance and performance across the range of modules or whose mode of attendance (part time/ flexible access etc.) means traditional measures of consistency in attendance are inappropriate.
- Students whose apparent under-performance on individual modules may be attributable to intellectual, personal or domestic pressures.
- Students whose strategy is to devote only such effort to a particular module as will assure progression.

## The innovation

EAS adopts a 'one stop shop' approach to administering its First Year Modules in that all 'house keeping' activities, allocation of tutorial groups, allocation of practical or fieldwork groups etc are undertaken by a 1st Year Coordinator, which not only reduces the load on module leaders but enables an holistic view of first year administration to be maintained.

Within this structure the basic monitoring system can be broken down into four principal stages:

- Tracking of attendance in formal contact sessions (lectures, tutorials, practical sessions or fieldwork) in each module.
- Tracking individual's use of WOLF where topics are used in a support role, as an alternative delivery method, for example in our Flexible Access programme or as a vehicle for formative and revision exercises.
- Recording scores in formal summative assessment.
- Synthesis of these data to develop an ongoing learning profile for each student so that systematic or atypical learning difficulties can be quickly identified and basic support or counselling can be offered.

To this end attendance registers are taken for every 'activity', viz: lectures, tutorials, practical or laboratory sessions and field trips, and engagement with online activity is recorded as appropriate. Student attainment in summative exercises is also recorded.

The principal recording system is an Access database (see Appendix 1) within which each student module selection (based on the Award Code and Pathways routes) is stored and which produces tables holding their subsequent 'activity' and performance records on each of these modules.

The data are monitored informally as the various activity records are input but the database is formally monitored at pre-determined points (3, 6 & 11 weeks) through the use of 'standard' queries (Appendix 2)

The first (week 3) monitoring event falls at the end of the student's 'option to change' period and in addition to indicating students who may be encountering difficulties in adjusting to life at University, it also serves to confirm the 'live' population of students on our Awards and Modules.

The second (week 6) event is perhaps the most important, as any students identified can be given prompt support and advice at a point where there is still time to 'recover' the situation.

The ultimate (week 11) event pinpoints previously identified students or those whose difficulties occurred late in the semester and for whom there may be a 'last ditch' opportunity for support or advice on 'resit' and re-adjustment options.

A student who has 'missed' two or more activities, within an individual module or across modules, during a monitoring period or who has failed to achieve a pass grade (D5) in any summative exercise is considered to be 'at risk'.

All 'at risk' students are invited to see the 1st Year Coordinator for an informal discussion about the situation and to air any problems they may wish to raise. This process is undertaken regardless of the student's Award.

The *ad hoc* monitoring of the data during input ensures any overlapping 'misses' i.e. week 3 and week 4 which would not trigger 'at risk' flags within their separate monitoring periods, still results in the issuing of an invitation.

If the Co-ordinator considers the problem to be outside his remit, the student may be referred to the Year Tutor and/or to appropriate counselling or advice sources within the University or Students' Union.

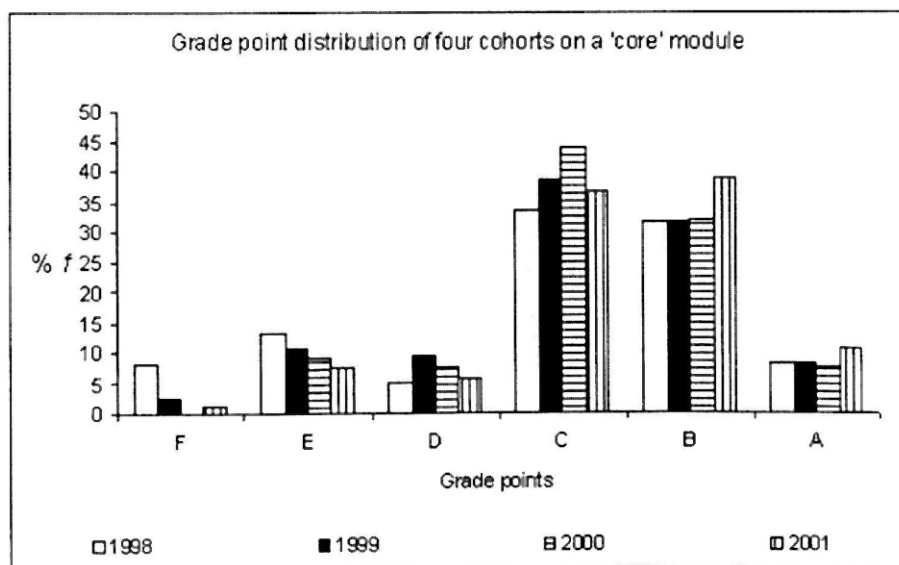
The names of any 'at risk' learners who fail to respond to the invitation are passed on to the Year Tutor who adopts a more formal approach to the situation and the student is invited to attend a less formal meeting with the SAS Year Tutor.

## Outcomes

**Figure 1.** Summary of progression for tracked cohort

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Progressed   | 76% |
| Suspended enrolments                                   | 3%  |
| False enrolments                                       | 3%  |
| Changed Training Route                                 | 1%  |
| Formal academic failure                                | 1%  |
| Ill health   | 1%  |
| Lost contact or left with no reasons given for leaving | 10% |
| Financial or employment related                        | 4%  |

**Figure 2.** Comparison of student performance on first semester core module over four years.



## Evaluation

Figure 1 indicates that 1% of the student cohort were not permitted to progress through formal academic failure as opposed to some 5% who were unable to complete due to financial and employment pressures or health reasons.

The greatest area of loss occurred amongst students whom the system indicated were at risk and who, generally, failed to respond to calls to interview and then ignored subsequent formal letters from the year tutors.

Where students responded to call for interview they benefited from the experience: in some cases, conversations concerning students' attendance records or performance brought to light problems such as child care provision (child minders), undeclared medical conditions or needs and social and domestic pressures. In many of these cases, being directed towards appropriate specialist advice and counselling (both University and Students' Union) has relieved these non academic problems, providing subsequent benefit to the student's academic performance.

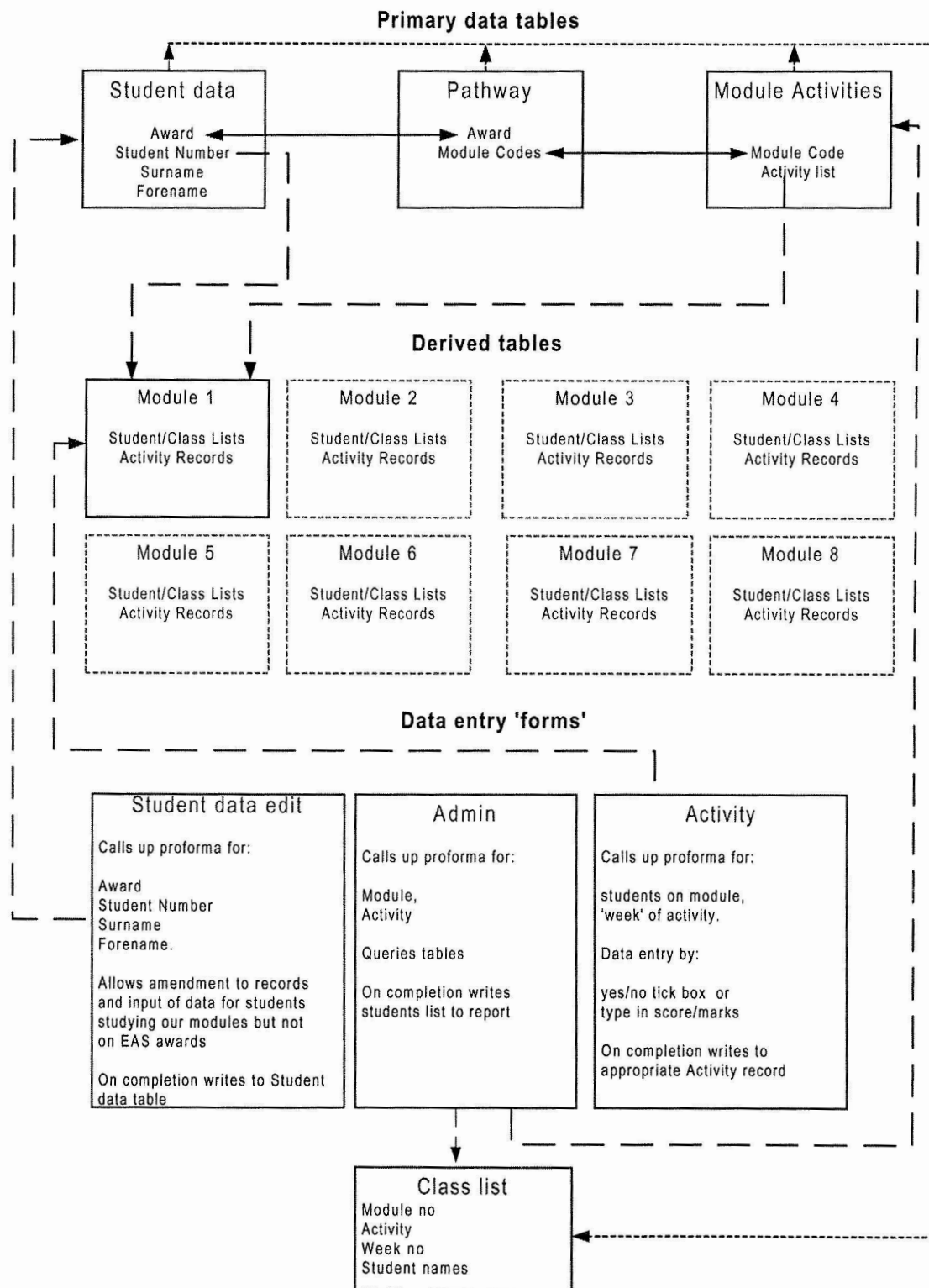
Figure 2 demonstrates an overall improvement in grades achieved by students under various levels of tracking suggesting that knowing their attendance and performance is being monitored on a weekly basis has a positive motivating effect on students.

It should be noted that the single most important facet of the project is the relationship between the students and the 1<sup>st</sup> Year Co-ordinator. Students see the co-ordinator as the first port of call to address any organisational, administrative and indeed many other problems and therefore a request to individuals to call to see him carries no particular significance or stigma.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Richard Homfray for his major contribution to the construction of the database system.

## Appendix 1: Structure of database



## Appendix 2: Structure of queries

